

THE BOOK OF THE WEEK.

UNDER FIRE. The Story of a Squad. By Henri Barbusse. (E. P. Dutton & Co.) \$1.50.

We have here the English version of a very powerful and popular French book which depicts the violent facts of warfare from the point of view of the private soldier in the trenches. In the original, as *Le Feu*, it received the prize of the Académie Goncourt for the best work written during the year, and had a sale of well over the hundred thousand copies. In English, as *Under Fire*, it is without doubt a success. But it is success of another kind, and the success of a very different thing. Nor is this difference a mere matter of translation. That inevitable change is the least part of it. There is the whole difference between the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon temperaments and point of view; so that a Frenchman and an American would react differently to the same experiences and would express their reaction in different ways. If the book might be, by some sheer magic of the translator, made precisely and utterly identical in the two tongues it would still mean one thing to us and quite another to our brothers in arms across the sea.

Take first the matter of translation. *Le Feu* is French realism; and even for French realism it is extreme. The author believes that truth is best conveyed by literal accuracy of details—of all details—and being a Frenchman he puts his theory into practice. He makes a point of reproducing verbatim the talk of the poilus among themselves, without omission or modifying of what the translator calls "the big words." Now, *prosa mots* does not mean big words; it means rough stuff, foul language of the sort that unpollished men speak alone together. It is often untranslatable, and in English quite unprintable. And if it were so printed, with all possible accuracy of rendering, the effect upon an English reader would not be at all the effect of the original. The effect in English would be of outrageous and disproportionate filth; whereas the effect in French is merely of men talking as such men do talk. The translator attempts to convey the effect through an admixture of refined words for unrefined ideas with rather ancient and wholly British slang. One can only sympathize with him in his impossible dilemma; but the result is what any reader may imagine and observe.

This is only a detail, of course; but it is an illustrative detail. For the difficulty is not merely to find the best English equivalent for what the author has to say; the difficulty is that the same thing said in our own tongue to ourselves and in French to Frenchmen has often diverse meanings; nor that alone, but a diversity also of tone and suggestion and effect. Here, for example, is a typical paragraph of description:

Tandis que l'aube s'élevait sur nous comme un soir d'orage, je vis encore un fois émerger et se recroiser sous l'écharpe du sud des nuages bas, les espèces rives abruptes, tristes, et sales, infiniment sales, boueuses de débris et d'immondices, de la croute tranchée de nous sommes. La lividité de la nuit blême et plombe les sacs de terre aux plans vagues luisants et bombés, et un long entassement de viâces et d'entrailles géantes mises à nu sur le monde. Dans la nuit, derrière moi, se creuse une excavation, et là un entassement de choses horizontales se dresse comme un bûcher.

Des trones d'arbres? Non; ce sont des cadavres.

Here it is in English:

Again I saw, when the dawn came down on us like a stormy evening, the steep banks of our crumbling trench as they came to life again under the sooty scarf of the low hanging clouds, a trench dismal and dirty, infinitely dirty, humped with debris and filthiness. Under the livid sky the sandbags are taking

the same hue, and their vaguely shining and rounded shapes are like the bowls and viscera of giants, nakedly exposed upon the earth.

In the trench wall behind me, in a hollowed recess, there is a heap of horizontal things like logs. Tree trunks? No, they are corpses.

Now, that is not ill translated; quite the contrary. And yet in the translation the whole character of the style is gone. It seems overintense, rhetorical, staccato; it agonizes to express each detail with the utmost violence, so that the whole impression weakens like the persuasiveness of an orator who raves and screams, of a picture under one glare of light destroying color and shade. And this effect is more or less inevitably the effect of the whole book to an English reader. It lacks light and shade and half-tones and proportion, and therefore loses force by constant violence, and emphasis by emphasizing everything alike. It is not so in French, because the normal pitch of French prose is so much higher that such writing does not seem forced or frenzied in the least by measurement upon its natural scale; it is only vigorous and vivid. The best way to read the book is by occasional chapters, or even pages. Then you get a striking impression by itself, and feel that it is poetic or wonderful or bizarre without weakening your appreciation by reiterated shocks.

And this is true not only of the style, but of the manner and substance of the book throughout. It is embarrassed by its own richness of material. In any two or three chapters of it there are enough horror, enough literary force and enough stark humanity to suffice an ordinary volume. "No, a more than ordinary volume. There are bits like the death of Paterio and his vision of that which had been once his home; like the anger of Volpate, or the visit of Euforie to his wife Mariette; like the tale of Eudoxie, whom Lamure loved from afar and at last found hideously near. Maupassant at his grimmest could hardly have pictured these; but Maupassant would have dealt with them singly, a story to each one.

Finally there is this to be said of the impression of the book as a whole and its point of view upon the war. The general effect is of an obscene and stagnant nightmare, and that is doubtless true. Yet it is not all the truth. The war is more than that, as no one knows better than these French who have made their cause the defense of Christendom. French realism is always a hard thing for us to understand. For it means sometimes realizing the details and then romanticizing about those details; and it means often the strange use of horror as we use laughter, for a solvent of beauty and an antidote to sentimentalism. They emphasize hell to throw light upon human nature standing erect and holding all hell in high disdain. For an Englishman or an American to write so of this war, as a mere wanton horror, would be at this time either weak or morbid. In a Frenchman writing for the French, it is no such thing. It is their kind of heroism.

CRITICAL REVIEWS OF IMPORTANT BOOKS

UTOPIA OF USURERS AND OTHER

ESSAYS. By Gilbert K. Chesterton. (Horn & Liveright.) \$1.25.

The difference between Mr. Chesterton and most other clever people is simply that Mr. Chesterton is so much more than merely clever; whereas the ordinarily clever man is merely clever and no more. Chesterton is not only a generally suspicious of mere cleverness. And they are quite right. It is easy enough to be clever if you do not care what you say. A fiery and a star may be equally sparkling; but the difference is the only question; but the star is a sun illuminating worlds, and the fiery illuminates nothing but its own underlife in the hope of attracting attention.

There is no difficulty about making epigrams which are lies. One has only to turn some commonplace upside down and say that parents must obey their children or that a husband is only a relation by marriage. The trouble with this kind of easy cleverness is that the commonplaces are frequently true. Many silly little creatures can be cleverly; but Mr. Chesterton can tell the truth cleverly. He tells it so cleverly that a public properly suspicious of paradox blindly and blithely assumes that he must be talking nonsense. We should probably have to talk nonsense in order to be as brilliant as that.

If you do not see this, that is because you are clever enough to appreciate cleverness and too lazy minded to judge and reason and examine truth. That is, you are an entirely normal person. For most of us thinking is very hard work. Emerson (who could and did do it) called it the hardest thing in the world. Mr. Chesterton can do it with apparent ease, precisely as a faderewski plays the piano with apparent ease, or as Matty could pitch ball or Napoleon win battles; that is, by being a genius. But he does think. Make no mistake.

about that. Being human he can be mistaken, just as the Emperor could lose a battle or the Old Master a game. Much more often he is not mistaken, even when he flies in the face of some commonly taken for granted idea. And if you will forget (having first enjoyed) his wit, and give yourself the pain of considering for yourself and with your own mind his wisdom, you will be surprised to find how often and how violently you agree with him. If you only think that you think, whereas in fact you get your opinions at second hand and ready made, you will conclude without any trouble that he is a mouthpiece of the common sense of the world.

There is, however, just one caution to be observed in the case of the present book. These essays were written for a Socialist newspaper, and they were written from 1913 to 1915. Now Mr. Chesterton is not a Socialist. Neither is he a radical in the modern sense, which usually means a person who believes that things grow without roots. He is a radical in the sense that he realizes, like every thinking man, the gigantic faults of our modern industrial civilization and that he is quite willing to go to the root of the matter in search of a remedy. He does his own thinking and takes no assent catchwords for granted. And since he is here writing for Socialists he writes in their language. But do not be deceived by the appearance of the word Capitalist on every other page. Observe what he says about Capitalism and you will discover that Mr. Chesterton's mind is not imprisoned in Greenwich Village. He may be mad, nor-west, but at least he is not mad South Washington Square.

He is perhaps the only revolutionary of modern times who understands the meaning of the word; for revolution means a turning back. He knows that the future must build upon the past if progress is to have any sane meaning. You cannot progress from nowhere. Also he is the greatest living demagogue; which is reason enough for the contemptuous unfaith with which he is regarded by the democracy. It is unfashionable nowadays to stone the prophet; we express that same spirit by applauding them as comedians. The issues discussed in this particular book, moreover, being questions of the days before the war are for the moment out of date. They are sleeping issues, not dead; and when the war is over they will abruptly become very much alive.

THE CREAM OF THE JEST. By James Hensch Cabell. (McBride and Company.) \$1.55.

The one thing which a perplexed reviewer can say with assurance of this volume is that Mr. Cabell vastly enjoyed the writing of it, and that, despite its surface airiness, there is an abundance of underlying seriousness of purpose. Imagine, if you please, a fairly successful novelist no longer young, and burdened with too ample flesh, possessed also of a wife in whom he is well content, but whose interests are confined to the fashion, the servants and the neighborhood gossip. Then all of a sudden this prosaic novelist begins in waking dreams to identify himself confusedly with a character in one of his own medieval romances and to hold wonderful interviews with his heroine, who is the one woman in the world and heroine of all romances past and future. In one of these dreams he receives from her a charm, the broken half of a circular piece of metal bearing a mystical inscription. Thereafter he is often puzzled in his waking hours to run across a queer semi-circular disk, which may or may not have come out of dreamland but which always seems to hypnotize him into another of those wonderful dreams which coincide with the period of his greatest literary popularity. Mr. Cabell does not dictate what he writes. He writes what he feels. He is one of those rare authors who are able to let down and a poet's spirit may leap back through the centuries and commune with the age old children of his own creation. Perhaps again our novelist, dozing comfortably in an armchair, saw himself and his prosaic wife strangely transformed by the halo of their vanished youth. Perhaps the broken disk was really a talisman from wonderland, or then again it may have been part of the broken top of Jar of mass-grease cream. At all events Mr. Cabell does not tell us. Perhaps what he means to say is that the most prosaic of us have within our reach the visions of gay trappings and the spirit of chivalry if only we had the trick of day dreaming opportunely. The chief handicap of this elusive and moonbeam volume is that there are so many lazy minded readers, who, while recognizing that it contains a percentage of true gold, will grudge the mental labor involved in getting it out.

SLAVES OF THE LAMP. By George Browne Howard. (W. J. Watt & Co.) \$1.35.

"Slaves of the Lamp" is a good story. It tells of the search and recovery of four jade plates inscribed in ancient Chinese with the directions for making Shandoo-smoking opium. Yorke Norroy is the common type of invincible detective-hero of mystery stories, the hero whose remarkable depends upon the ingenuity and invention of the author. Mr. Howard's hero is a likable person, amusing, and an excellent detective. The finding of each plate is a new adventure and each adventure is more exciting than the last. With the recovery of every plate are introduced new and romantic characters; from beginning to end there run only Yorke Norroy and Holly Lea, the young actress who made all the trouble in the first place by selling the four plates to buy a new frock. If you like detective stories it is interesting reading.

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